

STATE OF THE RIVER 2001

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RIVER PROFILE

Once so polluted it caught on fire, the 100-mile long Cuyahoga became a stark symbol of the plight of America's rivers, and a rallying point for passage of the Clean Water Act, one of the nation's landmark environmental laws. The modern day story of the Cuyahoga is a story of renewal and renaissance of the river through community re-investment and reintegration of the river back into the everyday life of the community.

Today, the comeback of the Cuyahoga River can be seen in its scenic upper river, home to over 252 endangered or threatened species of wildlife; the recovery of over 70 species of fish in its waters; the economic revitalization of The Flats (now one of Ohio's top tourist destinations); numerous recreational opportunities in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and multiple Metroparks; and its historic restoration of the Ohio & Erie Canal Corridor.

The Cuyahoga River drains a watershed of 812 square miles in Northeastern Ohio. From its headwaters near Burton, the river flows south for 50 miles to Akron, then turns abruptly north for 50 miles, emptying into Lake Erie in Cleveland. Although the watershed occupies only 3 percent of Ohio's land area it supports over 15 percent (1.6 million) of the state's population.

The Cuyahoga River was utilized for centuries by Native Americans as the primary means of access between Lake Erie and the Ohio River. The Signal Tree, a Native American marker of the portage path between the Cuyahoga and Tuscarawas Rivers can still be viewed in a Summit County Metropark. In 1975, the Treaty of Greenville designated the Cuyahoga River as the western boundary of the United States. Settlers flocked to the new Connecticut Western Reserve. Frontier farms and businesses needed access to markets for their goods so in 1832 the 308-mile Ohio & Erie Canal was constructed from Lake Erie to the Ohio River. The Canal's northernmost 50 miles lie along the Cuyahoga River from Lake Erie to Akron. The canal became the most prosperous in the state, as well as one of the most extensive and successful in the nation. In a few short years Ohio went from a backwoods wilderness to the third most populous state in the country. Industries that began and flourished along the river and canal included: Standard Oil, Quaker Oats, Sherwin-Williams, Republic Steel, Jones & Laughlin Steel, Firestone Tire, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, B.F. Goodrich, Hanna Mining, Schumacher Milling, and Sieberling Rubber.

After extensive damage from the Great Flood of 1913, the canal was abandoned. It remained forgotten until designation of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park in 1974 conserved over 33,000 acres of scenic open space between Cleveland and Akron and highlighted the historical importance of the canal. The Park has become one of the most popular in the nation, attracting over 3 million visitors a year.

In 1996, Congress designated the lower 50 miles of the Cuyahoga River as the Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor. The same section was also designated a National Scenic Byway in 2000. A canal towpath trail and scenic railroad parallels the lower Cuyahoga and the canal drawing thousands of visitors a year to a once hidden valley.

The upper Cuyahoga remains rural, with scattered farms, Amish communities, and wetlands. The area contains the highest concentration of bogs and fens in the State and is known for its rare plant communities including old growth white pine, tamarack and insectivorous plants. In 1974, twenty-five miles of the upper Cuyahoga River was designated by the State of Ohio as one of its 11 State Scenic Rivers, and has become very popular for canoeing activities.

The Cuyahoga River was named one of the fourteen American Heritage Rivers in 1998 because of its unique historical, cultural, historic, and environmental history. Municipal, business, planning, citizen interest and local, state and federal agency leaders have joined forces to further improve the quality of life along the river.

Vision of the Cuyahoga American Heritage River

It is time to retire the image of the Cuyahoga River as the symbol for polluted waterways and to restore its place in the community as our most important resource. The community vision for the Cuyahoga River is a renewal and renaissance of the river by integrating it back into the everyday life of the community. The Cuyahoga and its tributaries will be fishable, swimmable and accessible. Its watershed will be known by its residents for its uniqueness, history, and importance to their quality of life. This vision is focused on sustainable development of the Cuyahoga River watershed through balanced planning of economic and environmental uses of the river and surrounding landscape.

Accomplishments and Resources Leveraged

One major accomplishment has been reaching agreement on and disseminating a vision for the Cuyahoga AHR Initiative. This vision has been shared up and down the river by community and business partners, and the River Navigator.

Another accomplishment has been identifying and forming partnerships for priority projects. In



The Flats today, Cleveland Ohio

2000/2001, approximately \$49,000 was secured from the USFS for AHR priority projects. Examples of projects implemented with these resources include:

- Watershed Interpretive Plan, Signage, and Permanent Displays: \$35,940
- AHR Displays, brochures, and web page development: \$3,560
- Rural Road Runoff Brochure: \$2,000
- RiverDay 2001 Brochure: \$1,000
- Support for Cuyahoga River Communities Organization: \$5,000
- RiverScape Educational Project: \$400
- Fish Advisory Poster: \$1,000

Other AHR activities for the Cuyahoga River have included:

- Cooperation – Federal, state, and local agencies, organizations, and communities have been brought together, many for the first time, to share and work toward their vision of the future.
- Projects – Assistance has been provided in implementing multiple projects including: the removal of an abandoned railroad trestle, a study for the removal/modification of the Kent Dam, and the development of watershed groups and plans for some of the Cuyahoga tributaries. Numerous grant applications have been submitted and are now under review for watershed improvement, wetland inventory, land use planning, wetland restoration, and economic revitalization.
- Education and Outreach - Considerable efforts have been made to further education and outreach. The Cuyahoga River and the River Navigator have been featured in numerous newspaper articles including the New York Times, Cleveland Plain Dealer, and the Akron Beacon Journal. Three community workshops and over 80 programs have been given to local communities and organizations to promote the uniqueness of the watershed and its history, water quality, and current opportunities. A portable AHR display board was created and set up at numerous local events and activities to promote the program. The River Navigator and AHR Partners worked together to develop relationships with local communities, governments, and civic groups to develop a list of projects to be implemented. Virtually all of the local governments within the watershed have asked for some type of assistance from the AHR program.
- Grants – A grant for \$50,000 was obtained by from USEPA for a Geauga County Planning Commission study the impacts to the county under the full development of their land use plan. Results from the study will help the county build a solid scientific base for land use decisions and identify the need for the protection of open space and easements in an area that is facing rapid urban sprawl from the Cleveland area.

Future Challenges

The Cuyahoga AHR Program has enormous potential to enhance quality of life for communities and businesses up and down the Cuyahoga River. For the Cuyahoga AHR Program to continue to be effective and reach its full potential, the following actions need to be taken over the next two years:

- Continue to receive access to federal administrators and federal agencies to help communities revitalize riverfronts, restore precious habitat, preserve cultural and historic resources, save open space, create recreational opportunities, and spur economic growth;
- Continue to receive support and priority from the AHR Task Force in Washington, DC or a comparable institutional structure;
- Continue to receive project management and administrative support at the local level;
- Continue to promote education and outreach about the Cuyahoga River through activities like RiverDay, RiverScape, the River Symposium, multiple local events, and the Cuyahoga AHR web site;
- Continue to work with businesses on common objectives like furthering linked greenways and demonstrating soft engineering of shorelines;
- Obtain administrative or capacity building support for the Cuyahoga River Navigator in order to fulfill expectations of community and business partners, and to facilitate the unique partnerships required to deliver priority projects;
- Develop a coordinated series of interpretive displays and signage throughout the watershed;
- Secure funding for removal or modification of three Cuyahoga dams;
- Develop additional river access and promote canoe/boating liveries;
- Secure funding for wetland inventories and restoration;
- Secure funding for a cultural/historic survey of the watershed;
- Secure funding to acquire conservation easements, riparian buffers, and open space by local governments and land trusts;
- Help local governments with land use planning to promote wise growth;
- Assist local communities in correcting combined sewer overflow problems;
- Secure funding for septic tank inspection programs in Portage and Geauga Counties;
- Investigate projects with the USACE to help improve aquatic habitat in the 5.6-mile navigation channel;
- Assist local communities in developing watershed management plans for the river and its major tributaries;
- Help local communities clean up abandoned landfills;
- Assist local communities and businesses with securing funds and coordinating acquisition and operation of a debris harvester in the lower Cuyahoga River and harbor area;
- Provide assistance in the planning and acquisition of a trail greenway system throughout the watershed;
- Continue broad-based support of programs so that the AHR Program will be self-sufficient and locally funded within three years.

Community Priorities

Out of a list of over 40 project proposals, three priority (or Keystone) projects were identified by the AHR Partners for the Cuyahoga:

Conservation Easements:

Promote acquisition of conservation easements through publicity, education, endorsement, funding, and thorough understanding of the potential tax benefits to land-owners throughout the water-shed. Identify and coordinate funding sources for existing easements and to conduct a detailed needs analysis for Cuyahoga, Summit and Portage counties.

Watershed Interpretive Plan and Coordinated Sign-age:

Develop an interpretive plan for the entire watershed, including a series of permanent displays and signs to be installed at various locations along the river. Displays will offer specific accounts of each particular section of the river, telling the story of the Cuyahoga and its designation as an American Heritage River. Signs are proposed for identifying the river as an American Heritage River at major road/river crossings.

Debris Harvester:

Fund the acquisition and operation of a sustained debris management program for the lower Cuyahoga River, Cleveland Harbor, and near shore areas of Lake Erie. Recently completed planning/preliminary engineering studies have identified a debris harvester as a cost-effective approach to mitigation of the aesthetic impairment of the river. Other debris management measures, at the head end of the navigation channel or further up stream, to help limit the amount of debris in the river, may also be appropriate.



Cuyahoga American Heritage River

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Community-Based Process

The Cuyahoga American Heritage River (AHR) program is a multi-stakeholder process designed to achieve, sustain, and celebrate our communities, economies, histories, cultures, and environments. Oversight of the AHR program is provided by the *AHR Partners for the Cuyahoga*, with representatives from five key organizations that are well-established within the watershed, including:

- Cuyahoga River Remedial Action Plan (RAP) (lead organization/Chair)
- Upper Cuyahoga River Watershed Taskforce
- Ohio & Erie Canal Association
- Northeast Ohio Area wide Coordinating Agency (NOACA)
- Northeast Ohio Four County Regional Planning & Development Organization (NEFCO)

Each of these five organizations have been working in the watershed for many years, concentrating on different aspects of the river, dealing with issues such as water quality and habitat restoration, expanded recreation, historic preservation, land conservation, and economic development. This multi-stakeholder group meets once a month, including the River Navigator, and works together in a coordinated effort to restore and revitalize the river. Program coordination and administrative support is provided by the Cuyahoga RAP's non-profit arm, the Cuyahoga River Community Planning Organization (CRCPO).

The USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry, Northeastern Area, serves as the sponsoring federal agency to coordinate federal resources and provide a River Navigator. The River Navigator is housed locally with office space provided by the Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Peninsula, Ohio. He acts as a liaison between the AHR Partners and federal agencies to help communities implement the plan of action developed by the Partners. Projects are designed and driven by the Partners or the local communities. The Cuyahoga AHR Program has broad local support with over 100 communities and townships actively involved.

The heart of the AHR program is locally driven and designed solutions. The federal government role is fostering community empowerment and helping provide focused attention and resources to help river communities revitalize their economies, renew their culture and history, and restore their environment. The Program integrates the economic, environmental, and historic preservation programs and services of federal agencies to benefit communities engaged in efforts to protect and enhance their rivers. Further, it encourages investment in river communities, promoting partnerships and leveraging of state, nonprofit, and business resources.

The Cuyahoga AHR Program is based on adaptive management where priorities are set, projects are implemented, and results are measured in an iterative fashion for continuous improvement.



Once nearly devoid of fish, the fish are returning to the Cuyahoga!